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ABSTRACT

Most middle-aged and older adults today have the opportunity for long-term involvement with their grandchildren. An exploratory study was conducted to examine parents' desires for grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's upbringing. Parents (N=79) described ideal levels of grandparents' involvement in caretaking, disciplining, and advising. The results showed that ideal level of caretaking involvement significantly exceeded ideal levels of disciplining or advising involvement. Ideal levels of disciplining and advising involvement did not differ. Parent and family characteristics predicted ideal levels of grandparents' involvement. However, path analysis did not support hypotheses of causal linkages between these characteristics and desires for grandparents' involvement. Conclusions are that parents welcome grandparents' involvement in childrearing more than earlier research suggests, and that views of grandparents' involvement vary with family structure. Research including larger samples and identifying means through which parents convey their views to grandparents would further clarify the nature of grandparenthood. (Author/NB)

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PARENTS' DESIRES FOR GRANDPARENTS' CHILDREARING INVOLVEMENT: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Running Head: Parents' Desires

Abstract

In this exploratory study, parents (N=79) described ideal levels of grandparents' involvement in caretaking, disciplining, and advising. Ideal level of caretaking involvement significantly exceeded ideal levels of disciplining or advising involvement. Ideal levels of disciplining and advising involvement did not differ. Parent and family characteristics predicted ideal levels of grandparents' involvement. However, path analysis did not support hypotheses of causal linkages between these characteristics and desires for grandparents' involvement. Conclusions are that parents welcome grandparents' involvement in childrearing more than earlier research suggests, and that views of grandparents' involvement vary with family structure. Research including larger samples and identifying means through which parents convey their views to grandparents would further clarify the nature of grandparenthood.

PARENTS' DESIRES FOR GRANDPARENTS' CHILDREARING INVOLVEMENT:

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Scholars recognize grandparenthood as a significant family experience of middle and later adulthood, and researchers of the 1980's have examined that experience. One important issue is the means through which grandparents become and remain involved in grandchildren's upbringing. Some (e.g., Kahana & Kahana, 1971; Robertson, 1975) have posited that parents socialize grandparents for their family role. However, few data describe this socialization process. This paper reports findings of an exploratory study in which parents' desires regarding grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's upbringing were considered.

The study addressed three research questions. First, in which aspects of childrearing do parents desire the greatest and least grandparental involvement? Second, do characteristics of parents or their families significantly predict desires for grandparents' childrearing involvement? Third, do relationships between parent and family characteristics and desires for grandparents' involvement support models of causal relationships?

Today, most become grandparents in their 40's or 50's, rather than in old age (Troll, 1980). Given contemporary life expectancy, relationships with grandchildren can now last several decades, and families now include grandparents for longer than ever before. Recent surveys inform us that most grandparents see at least some grandchildren weekly, if not daily (Harris & Associates, 1975). Most middle aged and older adults today, then, have the opportunity for long-term involvement in grandchildren's upbringing.

Previous investigators have considered how grandparents become and remain involved in grandchildren's upbringing. Data reveal that parents affect grandparent-grandchild bonds. Robertson (1976) reported that young adult grandchildren believed that their parents had influenced their contact with grandparents and their attitudes toward grandparents. Similarly, Gilford & Black (1972) found that parents' attitudes and behavior influenced grandparents' and grandchildren's views of their relationship. Matthews & Sprey (1985) concluded that young adult grandchildren's affective closeness to grandparents reflected perceptions of their parents' closeness to the grandparents.

Previous investigators have also described grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's upbringing. Some have claimed that most American grandparents today have distant relationships with grandchildren (Kornhaber, 1985; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). However, others report that grandparents have meaningful, ongoing relationships with grandchildren (Hagestad, 1985; McGreal, 1984). Thomas (1982; 1985) found that most grandparents believed that they should help children and grandchildren. These grandparents also felt that they should not discipline grandchildren or advise parents. In other research, perceived responsibilities for helping grandchildren and caring for grandchildren were among the predictors of grandparenting satisfaction (Thomas, 1986).

Although research describes parents' influence upon grandparent-grandchild bonds, scholars have not yet considered parents' goals in affecting these bonds. To thoroughly understand the extended family's impact upon child development, investigators must consider parents' desires for grandparents'

involvement in grandchildren's upbringing. This exploratory study addressed that issue. More specifically, this study identified (1) in which of three aspects of childrearing (caretaking, disciplining, advising) parents desired greatest and least grandparental involvement, (2) parent and family characteristics predicting parents' desires for grandparents' involvement and (3) possible causal relationships between parent and family characteristics and desires for grandparents' childrearing involvement.

In this study, parents described the ideal nature of grandparents' involvement in taking care of grandchildren, disciplining grandchildren, and providing childrearing advice. Earlier research on perceptions of grandparenting (Thomas, 1982; 1985) suggested that parents would be most receptive to grandparents' caretaking involvement. Since previous investigators have not described parents' desires regarding grandparents' involvement in childrearing, hypotheses concerning predictors of these desires were not formulated. Path analyses testing causal models of desires for grandparents' involvement were performed as follow-up analyses to the multiple regression.

Method

Participants

Parents (N=79) who were either students at a midwestern university or patrons of day care centers in the surrounding city (approximate population 100,000) volunteered their participation. Parents' demographic background is summarized in Table 1. Seventy two women (51 married, 21 single) and seven men (six married, one single) participated; all were Caucasian. Two thirds worked outside of the home; most worked in white collar, clerical, or service

positions. Annual household income ranged from less than $10,000 to more than $40,000. Educational background ranged from some high school to graduate degrees; the modal level was some college coursework.

Insert Table 1 about here

The mean number of children was 1.91; mean age of the oldest child was 8.52, and mean age of the youngest child was 5.57. Most (55.4%) lived within 30 minutes travel of their parents, and most married parents (52.5%) also lived within 30 minutes travel of their spouse's parents. None shared a household with their parents, and none of the married parents shared a household with their spouse's parents.

Procedures

Mail questionnaire packets were distributed to students from the psychology laboratory, and to day care center patrons from the centers. Questionnaire packets included a cover letter, an informed consent form, the questionnaire regarding views of grandparents (described below), demographic questions, and a return envelope.

Rosters of parents receiving questionnaires were obtained. One week after receiving packets, parents received postcards thanking those who had already returned questionnaires and urging those who had not to do so promptly. Response rate was 83%.

The questionnaire included demographic and family background questions, and Likert scales asking about ideal levels of grandparents' involvement in (1) taking care of grandchildren (10 items, alpha = .61), (2) disciplining grandchildren (9 items, alpha = .71), and (3) giving advice about childrearing

(9 items, alpha = .79). Each scale item presented a statement describing grandparents' involvement and a response scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Statements were taken verbatim (or closely paraphrased) from pilot interview transcripts; each scale included positively- and negatively-worded items to minimize response bias. Item response values were added to produce scale scores.

Parents responded to each scale item by describing grandparents' ideal involvement in grandchildren's upbringing, rather than their parents' actual involvement. This study sought to identify parents' goals regarding grandparents' involvement, rather than perceptions of current involvement. Thus, views of ideal, rather than actual, involvement were the data of interest.

Results

Differences in Ideal Levels of Grandparents' Involvement

Paired sample t-tests were used to compare scores for views of ideal levels of grandparents' involvement in caretaking, advising, and disciplining. Scores for views of the ideal level of involvement in caretaking significantly exceeded scores for views of the ideal level of involvement in either disciplining, t (78) = 7.93, $p < .0001$, or advising, t (78) = 8.70, $p < .0001$. Views of ideal levels of involvement in disciplining or advising did not differ significantly, t (78) = .67, $p < .507$. Mean scale scores appear in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Predictors of Ideal Levels of Grandparents' Involvement

Stepwise multiple regression identified predictors of ideal levels of grandparents' involvement. Family characteristics evaluated as predictors were number of children, ages of the oldest and youngest children, whether the participant had living grandparents, and geographic proximity of the participant's parents. Participant characteristics evaluated as predictors were age, sex, marital status, employment status, and annual household income. Ideal level of grandparents' involvement in areas other than the criterion were also tested as predictors. For example, in evaluating predictors of the ideal level of grandparents' involvement in advising, ideal levels of involvement in caretaking and discipline were tested as predictors. These analyses are summarized in Tables 3-5.

Insert Tables 3, 4, 5 about here

The variables significantly predicted ideal level of grandparents' involvement in advising, Multiple R = .62, R^2 = .39, F (2, 59) = 18.61, p < .00001. Two variables were significant predictors (see Table 3). Fathers and parents who welcomed grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's discipline were most receptive to grandparents' childrearing advice. The variables also significantly predicted ideal level of grandparents' involvement in caretaking, Multiple R = .49, R^2 = .24, F (2, 59) = 9.08, p < .0004. Two variables were significant predictors (see Table 4). Parents who welcomed grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's discipline and those whose own parents lived nearby were most receptive to grandparents' involvement in caretaking. Finally, the variables significantly predicted ideal level of

grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's discipline, Multiple R = .61, R^2 = .37, F (2, 59) = 17.04, $p < .00001$. Two variables were significant predictors (see Table 5). Parents who had living grandparents and those who welcomed grandparents' childrearing advice were most receptive to grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's discipline.

Path Analyses

The multiple regression analyses were the basis for path analyses testing models of causal relationships between significant predictors and criteria. The causal model for desires regarding grandparents' involvement in advising included parent gender and desires for discipline involvement as direct causes of desires for advising. Whether the parent had living grandparents was included as an indirect cause, affecting desires for advising via desires for grandparents' discipline involvement. This model did not adequately represent relationships among these variables. Variables extraneous to the model accounted for most observed covariation, and the model did not reach statistical significance, L (4) < 1.00, $p < .05$.

The model of desires for grandparents' involvement in caretaking proposed proximity of parents' own parents and desires for discipline involvement as direct causes of desires for caretaking involvement. Whether the parent had living grandparents was an indirect cause, affecting desires for caretaking via desires for discipline involvement. This model also failed to adequately represent relationships among the variables. Again, covariation was primarily due to variables not included in the model, and the statistical test of the model was not significant, L (4) < 1.00, $p < .05$.

The causal model for parents' desires for grandparents' involvement in discipline proposed desires for involvement in caretaking and whether the parent had living grandparents as direct causes. Proximity of parents' own parents was an indirect cause, affecting desires for discipline involvement via desires for caretaking involvement. This model failed to adequately represent causes of desires for involvement. Most covariation was accounted for by extraneous variables, and the model was not statistically significant, $L(4) < 1.00$, $p > .05$.

Discussion

The study findings conformed to hypotheses. As expected, parents were more tolerant of grandparents' involvement in caretaking than in discipline or advising. In fact, these parents expressed greater desires for grandparents' involvement than some earlier work would suggest. Kornhaber (1985) claims that a "new social contract" has undermined grandparents' involvement in many families. Under the new social contract, parents determine the extent to which grandparents can nurture their grandchildren; grandparents and grandchildren are relatively powerless parties to the contract. The parents participating in this study, however, have apparently rejected some tenets of that contract. Mean scores for all scales assessing desires for grandparents' involvement in childrearing were 60-70% of the maximum possible scores. Although these parents may determine grandparents' opportunities to nurture grandchildren, parents' actions do not necessarily preclude grandparents' nurturance.

Parents' desires for grandparents' involvement in each aspect of childrearing were predictors of desires for involvement in the other aspects.

Clearly, these desires are closely interrelated, although the causal models tested here did not adequately represent these interrelationships. In subsequent work, investigators should test nonrecursive models of parents' perceptions of grandparents. The patterns of association identified in the multiple regression imply that models including multidirectional causal linkages may more adequately explain parents' views of grandparents' childrearing involvement than the unidirectional models evaluated here.[1]

Since predictors of desires for grandparents' involvement included proximity of participants' parents and whether the participant had living grandparents, we conclude that these desires reflect viability (indicated in intergenerational proximity) and complexity (indicated in number of family generations) of extended family ties. This conclusion is most useful as a hypothesis guiding research in which more indexes of viability and complexity of extended family ties are included.

Findings of continued investigation of extended family networks and views of grandparents could guide policy and program development aimed at optimizing multigenerational family functioning. Results of the present study suggest that such policies and programs must be adaptable to variations in extended family structure. For example, programmatic efforts to facilitate grandparents involvement in caretaking (perhaps as a means of enhancing family support available to dual career couples or single parents) should include recognition of the influence of proximity upon parents' desires for

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[1]Structural equation modeling analyses, such as LISREL, could test these nonrecursive models. Unfortunately, these techniques were not available for the analysis reported here.

grandparents' involvement in caretaking. The findings reported here suggest that the most receptive target audience for this hypothetical effort would be parents who have parents living nearby.

Furthermore, attempting to enhance grandparents' involvement with grandchildren by increasing parents' facilitation of that involvement would best be accomplished through increasing parents' receptiveness toward grandparents' involvement in caretaking, advising, and disciplining. One would expect intervention aimed at enhancing receptiveness toward any single aspect of involvement to have minimal impact, at best. Thus, policies and programs designed to optimize multigenerational family functioning should be planned as comprehensive, broad-based initiatives.

More generally, continued work examining parents' influence upon grandparent-grandchild relationships should include larger and more diverse samples of parents. Research identifying means through which parents communicate their desires regarding grandparent-grandchild involvement to both grandparents and grandchildren is also needed. Pursuing these directions would enhance understanding of grandparenthood and of extended family effects upon child development.

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Table 1

Parents' Demographic Characteristics

Mean Age	32.46 (5.56)
Mean Number of Children	2.06 (.86)
Mean Age Oldest Child	8.63 (5.35)
Mean Age Youngest Child	6.04 (10.13)
Highest Level of Education	
Some High School	1.3%
High School Degree	16.7%
Some College	50.0%
College or Graduate Degree	32.1%
Annual Family Income	
Less than $10,000	11.7%
$10,001 - $20,000	18.2%
$20,001 - $30,000	19.5%
$30,001 - $40,000	27.3%
More than $40,000	23.4%
Occupation	
White Collar & Professional	38.0%
Blue Collar	3.8%
Service & Clerical	20.3%
Other	2.5%
Not Employed	35.4%

Table 1 Continued

Proximity of Respondent's Parents	
Within 30 Minute Drive	55.4%
31 - 60 Minute Drive	7.7%
1 - 4 Hour Drive	10.8%
Farther Than 4 Hour Drive	26.1%
Frequency of Respondent-Parent Contact	
Almost Every Day	16.9%
1 - 2 Times Per Week	32.3%
2 - 3 Times Per Month	12.3%
Every 2 - 3 Months or less often	38.5%

Note: Standard deviations corresponding to mean values appear in parentheses.

Table 2

Scores for Ideal Levels of Grandparent Involvement Scales

Scale Name	Mean	Std. Dev.
Involvement in Caretaking	34.57a	5.23
Involvement in Discipline	28.89b	4.97
Involvement in Advising Parents	29.25b	5.19

Note: Means with different superscripts differ significantly, $p < .0001$.

Table 3

Significant Predictors of Ideal Level of Grandparents' Advising

Variable	Beta
Ideal Level of Grandparents'	
Involvement in Discipline	.53
Parent Gender[2]	-.33

[2]Dummy variable coded 1=Female, 0=Male

Table 4

Significant Predictors of Ideal Level of Grandparents' Involvement in Caretaking

Variable	Beta
Ideal Level of Grandparents' Involvement in Discipline	.35
Geographic Distance of Participants' Parents	-.34

Table 5

Significant Predictors of Ideal Level of Grandparents' Involvement in Discipline

Variable	Beta
Ideal Level of Grandparents'	
Advising	.47
Has Living Grandparents[3]	.30

[3]Dummy variable coded 1=Yes, 2=No